# UNDERSTANDING THE PRESENT THROUGH THE PAST

*a review by*
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Philip Gerard. ***The Last Battleground: The Civil War Comes to North Carolina***. University of North Carolina Press, 2019.

—. ***Cape Fear Rising***. 1994. Blair, 2019.

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Read more about **PHILIP GERARD** with the preceding story about his recent award, the highest civilian honor given by the North Carolina governor.

No doubt, Philip Gerard will look back at 2019 as a very good year. The publisher of his 1994 novel *Cape Fear Rising,* inspired by the 1898 Wilmington coup d'etat, celebrated its twenty-fifth anniversary with the release of a new edition with a foreword by Randall Kenan and an afterword from the author. The same year, UNC Press published Gerard's *The Last Battleground: The Civil War Comes to North Carolina,* a compilation of his Civil War series, published in installments from 2011 to 2015 in *Our State Magazine*. And in 2019, Gerard received the much-deserved honor of the North Carolina Award for Literature.

Gerard began his career as a journalist who was dedicated to finding stories. As he told his interviewer for the North Carolina Award video: "The most interesting things tend to be complex things, and complex things tend to cause controversy. But you can't really turn over any rock that's interesting enough and not come up with some kind of controversy."[1] His dedication to sharing stories and telling the truth led to a collection of stories about North Carolina during the Civil War and the novel he is most well-known for, *Cape Fear Rising*. Thirty-three years after the end of the Civil War, white supremacists, many of whom fought in the war, overthrew the government of Wilmington, NC, and forced most of the educated and influential African American leaders from the community. Not surprisingly, the issues that inspired the Civil War also influenced the 1898 Wilmington coup d'etat. Unfortunately, some of these same issues remain unresolved over 120 years after that insurrection. In both *The Last Battleground: The Civil War Comes to North Carolina* and *Cape Fear Rising*, Philip Gerard masterfully demonstrates how these historical events changed and shaped the Old North State and, perhaps, the United States we know today.

Gerard reports that he followed three rules while writing the installments that would become ***The Last Battleground: The Civil War Comes to North Carolina***: the stories he would retell must "in some significant way connect to North Carolina," they would go beyond the battles to show how the war also affected regular citizens and families of North Carolina, and they would be recounted "in present tense" (ix). As Gerard has explained, the role of an author of historical fiction "is to tell a compelling human story, born of true facts, that not only engages the reader emotionally but also sharpens or even awakens an interest in the history that underpins the story."[2] By following his rules for his nonfictional Civil War story collection, Gerard was able to present how the Old North State and North Carolinians were forever changed by the war.

Collectively, the stories of *The Last Battleground* provide a history of the Civil War in North Carolina that focuses on the effects the war had on the men, women, children, and economy of the Old North State. Gerard

[1] "2019 NC Award for Literature: Philip Gerard," North Carolina Department of Natural and Cultural Resources, 17 Nov. 2019: video; subsequently cited parenthetically.

[2] Philip Gerard, "The Novelist of History: Using the Techniques of Fiction to Illuminate the Past," *North Carolina Literary Review* 24 (2015): 118.

explains his purpose with this collection as "an attempt to tell the story pretty much the entire Civil War through the lens of one state, and it turns that North Carolina is the best state to do that because it sort of mirrored all the divisions and all the issues that the whole country at large and the South were feeling" ("2019 NC Award"). While the stories follow the war chronologically, they do not follow the generals and battles emphasized in history textbooks. Instead, Gerard focuses on the citizens of North Carolina who were greatly affected by the war years, believing, "All of those human stories add up to a panorama that is far more interesting and complicated than the kind of North/South battle lines, big battle, and then Lincoln frees the slaves narrative, which is sort of the fifth-grade version that we all got in our history class" ("2019 NC Award").

As the war ravaged the state in numerous ways, Gerard tells stories of lost loved ones, rundown and lost farms, women who kept up families and farms alone, Native Americans who fought, nuns who nursed the sick and injured, slaves who fought for their freedom, deserters, and finally o those present during the Confederacy's surrender. He writes, "As the hard winter of 1865 warms into spring, virtually everything that will affect the outcome of the war – and the coming peace – is happening in North Carolina. And each of the public events is also deeply personal, full of private longing, fear, expectation, desire, suffering, triumph, and heartbreak" (4). Through the stories in The Last Battleground, it becomes clear how pivotal a role the Old North State and its citizens played in America's civil war. It also becomes clear just how affected North Carolinians were by the devastation of the war.

The collection begins with "The Pageant and the Glory: Parading Off to War." Per his rule of writing in the present tense, Gerard describes the men as they head off to war: "All over North Carolina, the war begins in a pageant of silk banners and marching men, young and eager, a jubilee of parades with brass bands and snappy drummer boys beating the step with a light tattoo" (5). The men carry flags and banners made by women like Mary Harper "Mamie" Morehead. Just as men in the other Confederate states believed, North Carolina soldiers were sure of themselves, confident that they would soon return to their families and their lives. However, as Gerard reminds the reader, the battles of Fredericksburg and Gettysburg had not yet occurred, and the men had not yet gone hungry, had not witnessed the power of a cannon or their fellow soldiers die, had not "watched the surgeons sawing off legs and arms for hours on end" and the punishment of the men so desperate to return to their families that they would desert. "They are not yet veterans. But for that distinction they will not have long to wait" (10).

As the collection continues through stories of the war, Gerard recounts a wealthy plantation owner who evacuated his family from Wilmington when yellow fever ravages the city. He leaves behind a slave to take care of his property; however, many slaves were not as loyal to their masters as Southern apologist mythology would have us believe. Tales of runaway slaves are woven throughout the book, demonstrating their desperation and the risks these people were willing to take for their freedom.

The "new national pastime" (34) of baseball was played in prisons. "In fact, Salisbury Prison has become the prime venue for base ball" (35). Even so, the prisons were certainly not humane, enjoyable places for soldiers on either side of the divide. Recounting stories of men dying in hospitals and prisons throughout the state, Gerard does not hold back details reflecting the horrific conditions these men suffered in. The same baseball-playing Salibury prison became a "hellhole of misery

COURTESY OF REYNOLDA HOUSE MUSEUM OF AMERICAN ART, WINSTON-SALEM, NC

RIGHT ***Union Prisoners at Salisbury***, N.C., 1863, by Otto Boetticher (hand-colored lithograph on paper, 25.5x40.25), a gift of Barbara B. Millhouse to the Reynolda House Museum of American Art

and death" (40). Deaths suffered on the battlefield, in hospitals, and in prisons ripped through families throughout the state. Gerard writes about the Stockard family who lost seven men: three brothers, their uncle, and three of their cousins (two of whom were brothers) (130). As soldiers, like the Stockards, piled up in the fields, Christian leaders joined troops as they engaged in the war. They ministered to the sick and dying. One man, the Reverend Alexander Davis Betts, preached to congregations throughout North Carolina for fifty years following the war, "time and again meeting survivors from his old regiment, attended always by a company of ghosts" (146).

While the men fighting and the men administering to the soldiers were engaged in battle, families were at home, struggling to keep their farms and businesses from going under, to put food on their tables, and to maintain hope in spite of no information about how their loved ones were doing on the battlefront. Gerard tells these stories as well. One soldier, Frances Marion Poteet from McDowell County, leaves a wife and children behind when he goes to war. After being threatened with eviction, Poteet "rankles at the law that keep him in the army fighting for a cause that is not his own" (149). Poteet deserts the army to return home and help his wife, Martha. He decides to return to the army and is arrested for his desertion. Martha continues to struggle while he suffers in prison. Despite her strength, "she comes close to breaking" (151).

As the war continues, the effects become more damaging to the citizens of North Carolina. Families developed new ways to mourn their loved ones:

> If the body of a beloved son, husband, or father cannot be carried home from a distant battlefield, then the next best thing is to recover the story of how he died, who was with him to offer comfort and prayer, and with what care and honor he was laid to rest. In their letters home to grieving families, soldiers are careful to provide such details, knowing their own families would crave the same emotional comfort. (229)

Black crepe clothing was no longer discarded after a period of mourning; it was saved, as families knew that they or someone else would soon be in need of it. The families also mourned their lost loved ones with song. The sacrifices were becoming too much, but the dying, the mourning, the stories, the songs, and the black clothing continued.

While speaking with Gerard, I recounted the story from *The Last Battleground* that stuck with me the most, told in Chapter 27, "Occupying Army." In desperate need of soldiers, the Confederate army called in cadets, mere boys (the youngest only fifteen), from the Virginia Military Institute. The boys marched eighty miles in the rain to get to the battlefield. Gerard writes, "Hard pressed by the enemy, but wracked by doubt to the last, Breckinridge orders, 'Put the boys in, and may God forgive me for the order.'" More than a quarter of the boys were killed or wounded. After the battle, "they leave a sight that will come to symbolize the glorious and futile sacrifice of brave boys in the Cause: a field of lost shoes, sucked off their feet by the glutinous mud in the trampled wheat field" (197). This visual reminded me of the room of shoes once worn by Jewish concentration camp victims in the Holocaust museum in Washington, DC, reflecting how history repeats, and innocent victims often pay the heaviest prices.

In turn, Gerard shared one of the stories that stuck with him, which he told in Chapter 35, "Sisters of Mercy," about nuns who came from the North to tend to the wounded in New Bern and found men in conditions unfit for animals: "Patients lie in filth, their dirty bandages unchanged for weeks, walls and floors stained with blood, only hardtack and salt beef for food. Medicine of any kind is scarce, and the only nurses are other patients, untrained and unwashed, many of them too ill to stand" (252). The nuns swiftly made changes to the hospital, making it cleaner and more sanitary. Mother Mary Madeline Tobin demanded supplies and the key to the storehouse, or else she would "take her either sisters and return to New York" (253). Despite being wary of the Sisters, the soldiers were quickly won over by the care and love they received from

COURTESY OF ANGELA LOVE MOSER

the nuns. So admired, loved, and appreciated were the nuns that some dying soldiers believed them to be angels. "When Father Bruhl is summoned to the bedside of a dying man who wishes to be baptized, he inquires about the man's faith. 'What the Sisters believe, that is what I believe,' he says" (254). The Sisters stayed until 1863 when they were no longer needed. In Washington, DC, there is a stone monument in honor of their service. On it is inscribed:

> They Comforted The Dying,
> Nursed The Wounded,
> Carried Hope To The Imprisoned,
> Gave In His Name A Drink Of Water To The Thirsty. (257)

Gerard argues that the Civil War was the precursor to the 1898 coup, and *The Last Battleground* "is basically the back story to" the coup that inspired his novel.[3] According to Gerard, "it's plain the Old North State became a keystone to the whole rebellion" (326). No state sacrificed more during the war than the Old North State. Of the North Carolina men old enough, or young enough, to fight, one in four died. The death toll from North Carolina equaled "30,000 to 35,000 men," and it is unknown how many women, children, and slaves died over the course of the war (326). Many North Carolinians were sent to fight and die in a war in which they had no real stake. These sacrifices were from a state divided in its beliefs; half the population did not agree with the war and did not want to secede, while the other half wanted to secede and keep the institution of slavery alive. The war was over, yet, in North Carolina, "[t]he hope and terror and heartbreak of Reconstruction will soon begin" (322). As the "winners" are those who write history, the 1898 Wilmington coup d'état is an important historical event that was first misrepresented by those who initially recorded it (in white-owned publications, that is), then largely dropped by historians. According to Gerard most people "started denying that it ever happened" by the 1920s (personal interview). So after early novels inspired by the coup, for example, Charles Chesnutt's *The Marrow of Tradition* (1901) and Thomas Dixon's *The Leopard's Spots* (1902), the latter written from the white supremacist point of view, memories of the coup were largely buried. However, with its original publication in 1994, Gerard's novel ***Cape Fear Rising*** shone a light on this suppressed chapter in North Carolina history.

Gerard spent a year researching the 1898 coup using only primary documents because he "didn't want any secondhand gauzy memories . . . or any distorted mythologies . . . that just aren't true." He also went to a museum where he physically investigated a Gatling gun and walked the important areas where the coup occurred in Wilmington. His novel started "a ball rolling" that led to North Carolina ordering an investigation and report about what really happened (personal interview). Between 1995 and 2000, residents of Wilmington and faculty from UNC Wilmington began to discuss the coup. In 2000, the North Carolina state legislature ordered an investigation into the coup. LeRae Umfleet wrote a report of the coup, from the causes, to the violence of the event, to the aftermath. Her 2009 book, A Day of Blood: The 1898 Wilmington Race Riot, is considered the first definitive report on the events of and leading up to the 1898 coup d'etat, the only successful coup d'etat in American history. From Gerard's novel to the official report, what facts that could be uncovered and regathered were finally revealed.

In *Cape Fear Rising*, Gerard tells the story of the 1898 coup through the eyes and experiences of the completely fictional Sam and Gray Ellen Jenks, a married couple who relocate to Wilmington from Chicago. Through the outsider eyes of these newcomers, Gerard is able to tell a compelling story that engages the reader and awakens an interest in this bit of little-known history. The Jenks arrive in Wilmington in August of 1898 and quickly find themselves caught up in the secrets and conspiracies that lead to a coup d'etat of the local government. Sam, a journalist, works for *The Messenger*, the white-owned newspaper in Wilmington. The couple's relationship is strained, as Sam is a recovering alcoholic, and their efforts to have a child have recently resulted in a miscarriage. Also, Sam does not talk with Gray Ellen about a major reason for his drinking: his cowardly behavior as a journalist during the Spanish American War. Gray Ellen, a schoolteacher, is Sam's much needed moral compass in Wilmington, as he increasingly

[3] Angela Love Moser, personal interview with Philip Gerard, Scuppernong Books, Greensboro, NC, 8 Aug. 2019.

OPPOSITE LEFT **Angela Love Moser with Philip Gerard after his reading at Scuppernong Books, Greensboro, NC, 8 Aug. 2019**

finds himself wrapped up in the schemes, beliefs, and opinions of the white supremacists planning to take control of the local government, if not by votes, then by force.

In one memorable scene, Gray Ellen and Sam attend a white supremacist meeting. In this scene, Gerard recounts the historical speech by Colonel Alfred Moore Waddell about "the miscreants, the vile perpetrators of such a crime spree," blaming the "*Negro* race" for rising up against the white man (210). Waddell asks the crowd, "Will we of the Anglo-Saxon race stand for this any longer?" to which the crowd yells, "No!" Waddell continues to rile up the crowd until they are standing, shouting, clapping, and singing battle songs from the Civil War. Waddell bellows, "Let them understand that we will not live under these intolerable conditions. No society can stand it! We are resolved to change them, if we have to choke the current of Cape Fear with carcasses!" As the speech comes to an end, Sam notes that Gray Ellen is crying and, after Waddell states, "Negro domination . . . shall henceforth be only a shameful memory" (212), she has disappeared from his sight. Sam finds her on the street, where she is hanging from a lamppost shouting, "You lost the War! . . . Can't you get it through your heads? You *lost* the goddamn *War*!" Yet, while she is trying to help the citizens of Wilmington (and her husband) see the truth of what is happening around them, her words go unheeded. One man shouts back at her, "Maybe we did, sweetheart – but we'll sure win this election!" (213). Through this scene and similar speeches and conversations among the white supremacists, it becomes clear that many of the white men are still professing views that led to the Civil War. They are also trying to win back the status they lost when the South surrendered and re-entered the United States, as well as to put members of the race formerly enslaved back into the limitation of service jobs.

When asked why he decided to make Sam a recovering alcoholic, Gerard explained that he wanted a character who had everything to lose and:

> What I didn't want was this Yankee coming in all morally high and mighty, passing judgment on the poor Southern cousins. What I wanted was somebody who's flawed. It's really easy when things are going well and you're prosperous and you have nothing to lose to take the moral high ground. It's very hard when what you do may destroy your livelihood and endanger you or your family, might ruin your reputation, might take all the money out of your bank account. So, when you stand up for something, part of the question is, what is it going to cost you? (personal interview)

Sam recognizes that if he makes the wrong decisions or starts drinking again from the pressure of being pulled one way by his employer and patrons and another by his wife, he could lose Gray Ellen forever. He is enjoying his position as the favored journalist of Waddell's story, but he knows that Gray Ellen (again, who reflects his own conscience) does not agree with Waddell's plans for Wilmington, and if he does not have the courage to thwart the establishment's ideas about how he should report on these events, he could lose her. Sam ultimately has to decide if he wants to join the white supremacists – and, most likely, lose his wife – or go against the white supremacists and stand up for what's right, thus losing the power and prestige being offered to him.

As the power of the white supremacists went unchecked in Wilmington, it is going unchecked in the United States today. Gerard wanted to release a twenty-fifth anniversary edition of *Cape Fear Rising* because he had once thought, "my God, white supremacy, that will never come around again," but then recent events suggested otherwise: "Look, we just had a shooting that was based on white supremacy essentially. We have a president that's touting it every chance he gets and pretending he's not," he told me (personal interview). From Charlottesville, VA, to Charleston, SC, to El Paso, TX, inspired by hate, white supremacists are continuing to leave death and destruction in their wake. In order to understand these present events and put an end to them, we have to remember the past, accurately, and acknowledge when history is being repeated. After all, as Gerard writes in the Afterword to his new edition of *Cape Fear Rising*, "If you don't tell the story in its truth, you relive it over and over again" (443). Today the ghosts of the Civil War and the Wilmington coup are, indeed, still haunting the United States as similarly terrifying events play out throughout the country. Gerard's two books collectively underscore that it's past time to break this cycle of hate and violence. ■